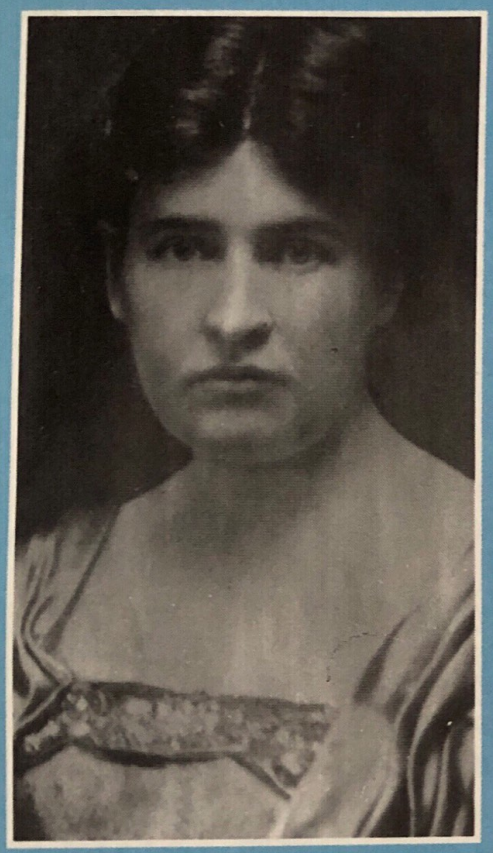
WILLA CATHER

1873–1947



Willa Cather was born in a small town in western Virginia. When she was ten, her family moved to a farm near the frontier town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Here, many of Cather's new neighbors were immigrants—Swedes, Germans, Slavs, and Russians—struggling to build a life for themselves in their new land and determined to preserve the culture of the land they left behind. Through her interaction with this diverse group of people, Cather developed an awareness of certain qualities shared not only by people of the frontier but by people from all over the world. She also gained a rich cultural background, studying foreign languages, history, and classical music and opera. She wrote of her childhood: "On Sundays we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or Swedish church. We could go to a French Catholic settlement or into the Bohemian township and hear one in Czech, or we could go to the church with the German Lutherans."

After graduating from the University of Nebraska in 1895, Cather worked as an editor for a Pittsburgh newspaper, while writing poems and short stories in her spare time. Her first collection of stories, *The Troll Garden,* was published in 1905. The following year she moved to New York, where she worked as the managing editor for *McClure's Magazine.* In 1912, the year after she published her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge,* she left the magazine to devote all her energy to writing. During the next several years, she produced three novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913); *The Song of the Lark* (1915); and *My Antonia* (1918), which captured the flavor of life in the midwestern prairies. In 1923 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *One of Ours* (1922).

Cather shifted her attention from the Midwest to the Southwest in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and to seventeenth-century Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). She also published two collections of short stories: *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920) and *Obscure Destinies* (1932); and a collection of critical essays and recollections of earlier writers: *Not Under Forty.*

In her work Cather displayed her admiration for the courage and spirit of the immigrants and other settlers of the frontier while at the same time conveying an intense awareness of the loss felt by some of the pioneers as well as the loneliness and isolation from which they suffered. In "A Wagner Matinée" Cather captures this sense of loneliness and isolation by contrasting the stark realities of frontier life with the possibilities of life in a more cultured world.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

A Wagner Matinée

Writers' Techniques

Characterization. Characterization is the means by which a writer reveals a character's personality. Writers generally develop a character through one of the following methods: direct statements about the character, physical descriptions of the character, the character's actions, the character's thoughts and comments, or other characters' reactions to or comments about the character.

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, writers began turning to the first-person and third-person limited points of view. When a writer limits the point of view to one character, as Cather does in "A Wagner Matinée," most of what is revealed about the characters is shaped by the thoughts of the character from whose point of view the story is being told.

Focus

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "[Music] takes us out of the actual and whispers to us dim secrets that startle us to wonder as to who we are, and for what, whence, and whereth." Discuss the meaning of this quotation. Think about the powerful effect music often has on people's memories and emotions. Recall a piece of music—one that has no lyrics—that can produce a strong effect on your memories and emotions. Then freewrite about it.

Primary Source

As you read "A Wagner Matinée," you will notice Willa Cather's harsh portrayal of the Midwest. Although this portrayal incensed many members of Cather's family, Edith Lewis, a close friend, found herself agreeing with it. Here Lewis recalls how she felt during one trip she took with Cather to Red Cloud, Nebraska.

> A new convention had to be created for [Nebraska]; a convention that had nothing to do with woods and water-falls, streams and valleys and picturesque architecture. . . . There it lay; and it was as new, as unknown to art as it was to the pioneer.
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> Although I had grown up in Nebraska, I remember how lost in the prairies Red Cloud seemed to me . . . as if the hot wind that so much of the time blew over it went on and left it behind, isolated, forgotten by the rest of the world. It seemed flattened down against the sea of earth as a boat of shipwrecked men is flattened down, almost imperceptible, among the waves. And I felt again that forlornness, that terrible restlessness that comes over young people born in small towns in the middle of the continent; the sense of being cut off from all the great currents of life and thought.

A Wagner Matinée

Willa Cather

I received one morning a letter written in pale ink, on glassy, blue-lined notepaper, and bearing the postmark of a little Nebraska village. This communication, worn and rubbed, looking as though it had been carried for some days in a coat pocket that was none too clean, was from my Uncle Howard. It informed me that his wife had been left a small legacy by a bachelor relative who had recently died, and that it had become necessary for her to come to Boston to attend to the settling of the estate. He requested me to meet her at the station, and render her whatever services might prove necessary. On examining the date indicated as that of her arrival, I found it no later than tomorrow. He had characteristically delayed writing until, had I been away from home for a day, I must have missed the good woman altogether.

The name of my Aunt Georgiana called up not alone her own figure, at once pathetic and grotesque, but opened before my feet a gulf of recollections so wide and deep that, as the letter dropped from my hand, I felt suddenly a stranger to all the present conditions of my existence, wholly ill at ease and out of place amid the surroundings of my study. I became, in short, the gangling farmer boy my aunt had known, scourged with chilblains and bashfulness, my hands cracked and raw from the corn husking. I felt the knuckles of my thumb tentatively, as though they were raw again. I sat again before her parlor organ, thumbing the scales with my stiff, red hands, while she beside me made canvas mittens for the huskers.

The next morning, after preparing my landlady somewhat, I set out for the station. When the train arrived I had some difficulty in finding my aunt. She was the last of the passengers to alight, and when I got her into the carriage she looked not unlike one of those charred, smoked bodies that firemen lift from the *débris* of a burned building. She had come all the way in a day coach; her linen duster[1] had become black with soot and her black bonnet gray with dust during the journey. When we arrived at my boardinghouse the landlady put her to bed at once, and I did not see her again until the next morning.

Whatever shock Mrs. Springer experienced at my aunt's appearance she considerately concealed. Myself, I saw my aunt's misshapen figure with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz Josef Land,[2] or their health somewhere along the upper Congo.[3] My Aunt Georgiana had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory, somewhere back in the latter sixties. One summer, which she had spent in the little village in the Green Mountains[4] where her ancestors had dwelt for generations, she had kindled the callow fancy of the most idle and shiftless of all the village lads, and had conceived for this Howard Carpenter one of those absurd and extravagant passions which a handsome

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1. duster *n.*: A short, loose smock worn to protect clothing from dust.
2. Franz Josef Land: A group of islands in the Arctic Ocean.
3. Congo: River in central Africa.
4. Green Mountains: Mountains in Vermont.

FROM ARKANSAS
George Schreiber
Sheldon Swope Art Gallery, Terre Haute, Indiana

country boy of twenty-one sometimes inspires in a plain, angular, spectacled woman of thirty. When she returned to her duties in Boston, Howard followed her; and the upshot of this inexplicable infatuation was that she eloped with him, eluding the reproaches of her family and the criticism of her friends by going with him to the Nebraska frontier. Carpenter, who of course had no money, took a homestead in Red Willow County,[5] fifty miles from the railroad. There they measured off their eighty acres by driving across the prairie in a wagon, to the wheel of which they had tied a red cotton handkerchief, and counting its revolutions. They built a dugout in the red hillside, one of those cave dwellings whose inmates usually reverted to the conditions of primitive savagery. Their water they got from the lagoons where the buffalo drank, and their slender stock of provisions was always at the mercy of bands of roving Indians. For thirty years my aunt had not been farther than fifty miles from the homestead.

But Mrs. Springer knew nothing of all this, and must have been considerably shocked at what was left of my kinswoman. Beneath the soiled linen duster, which on her arrival was the most conspicuous feature of her costume, she wore a black stuff dress whose ornamentation showed that she had surrendered herself unquestioningly into the hands of a country dressmaker. My poor aunt's figure, however, would have presented astonishing difficulties to any dressmaker. Her skin was yellow from constant exposure to a pitiless wind, and to the alkaline water which transforms the most transparent cuticle into a sort of flexible leather. She wore ill-fitting false teeth. The most striking thing about her physiognomy, however, was an incessant twitching of the mouth and eyebrows, a form of nervous disorder resulting from isolation and monotony, and from frequent physical suffering.

In my boyhood this affliction had possessed a sort of horrible fascination for me, of which I was secretly very much ashamed, for in those days I owed to this woman most of the good that ever came my way, and had a reverential affection for her. During the three winters when I was riding herd for my uncle, my aunt, after cooking three meals for half a dozen farmhands, and putting the six children to bed, would often stand until midnight at her ironing board, hearing me at the kitchen table beside her recite Latin declensions and conjugations, and gently shaking me when my drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs. It was to her, at her ironing or mending, that I read my first Shakespeare; and her old textbook of mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands. She taught me my scales and exercises, too, on the little parlor organ which her husband had bought her after fifteen years, during which she had not so much as seen any instrument except an accordion, that belonged to one of the Norwegian farmhands. She would sit beside me by the hour, darning and counting, while I struggled with the "Harmonious Blacksmith"; but she seldom talked to me about music, and I understood why. She was a pious woman; she had the consolation of religion; and to her at least her martyrdom was not wholly sordid. Once when I had been doggedly beating out some passages from an old score of "Euryanthe" I had found among her music books, she came up to me and, putting her hands over my eyes, gently drew my head back upon her shoulder, saying tremulously, "Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you. Oh! dear boy, pray that whatever your sacrifice be it is not that."

When my aunt appeared on the morning after her arrival, she was still in a semi-somnambulent state. She seemed not to realize that she was in the city where she had spent her youth, the place longed for hungrily for half a lifetime. She had been so wretchedly trainsick throughout the journey

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5. Red Willow County: County in southwestern Nebraska that borders on Kansas.

that she had no recollection of anything but her discomfort, and, to all intents and purposes, there were but a few hours of nightmare between the farm in Red Willow County and my study on Newbury Street. I had planned a little pleasure for her that afternoon, to repay her for some of the glorious moments she had given me when we used to milk together in the straw-thatched cowshed, and she, because I was more than usually tired, or because her husband had spoken sharply to me, would tell me of the splendid performance of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*[6] she had seen in Paris in her youth. At two o'clock the Boston Symphony Orchestra was to give a Wagner[7] program, and I intended to take my aunt, though as I conversed with her I grew doubtful about her enjoyment of it. Indeed, for her own sake, I could only wish her taste for such things quite dead, and the long struggle mercifully ended at last. I suggested our visiting the Conservatory and the Common[8] before lunch, but she seemed altogether too timid to wish to venture out. She questioned me absently about various changes in the city, but she was chiefly concerned that she had forgotten to leave instructions about feeding half-skimmed milk to a certain weakling calf, "Old Maggie's calf, you know, Clark," she explained, evidently having forgotten how long I had been away. She was further troubled because she had neglected to tell her daughter about the freshly opened kit of mackerel in the cellar, that would spoil if it were not used directly.

I asked her whether she had ever heard any of the Wagnerian operas, and found that she had not, though she was perfectly familiar with their respective situations and had once possessed the piano score of *The Flying Dutchman*. I began to think it would have been best to get her back to Red Willow County without waking her, and regretted having suggested the concert.

From the time we entered the concert hall, however, she was a trifle less passive and inert, and seemed to begin to perceive her surroundings. I had felt some trepidation lest one might become aware of the absurdities of her attire, or might experience some painful embarrassment at stepping suddenly into the world to which she had been dead for a quarter of a century. But again I found how superficially I had judged her. She sat looking about her with eyes as impersonal, almost as stony, as those with which the granite Ramses[9] in a museum watches the froth and fret that ebbs and flows about his pedestal, separated from it by the lonely stretch of centuries. I have seen this same aloofness in old miners who drift into the Brown Hotel at Denver, their pockets full of bullion, their linen soiled, their haggard faces unshorn, and who stand in the thronged corridors as solitary as though they were still in a frozen camp on the Yukon, or in the yellow blaze of the Arizona desert, conscious that certain experiences have isolated them from their fellows by a gulf no haberdasher could conceal.

The audience was made up chiefly of women. One lost the contour of faces and figures, indeed any effect of line whatever, and there was only the color contrast of bodices past counting, the shimmer and shading of fabrics soft and firm, silky and sheer, resisting and yielding: red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, ecru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colors that an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape, with here and there the dead black shadow of a frock coat. My Aunt Georgiana regarded them as though they had been so many daubs of tube paint on a palette.

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6. Les Huguenots (hyo͞o′ gə nät′): Opera written in 1836 by Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864).
7. Wagner (väg′ nər): Richard Wagner (1813–1883), a great German composer who is responsible for the development of the musical drama.
8. Common: Boston Common, a small park in Boston.

9. Ramses (ram′ sēz): Egyptian kings who ruled from c.1315 to c.1090 B.C.

When the musicians came out and took their places, she gave a little stir of anticipation, and looked with quickening interest down over the rail at that invariable grouping; perhaps the first wholly familiar thing that had greeted her eye since she had left old Maggie and her weakling calf. I could feel how all those details sank into her soul, for I had not forgotten how they had sunk into mine when I came fresh from plowing forever and forever between green aisles of corn, where, as in a treadmill, one might walk from daybreak to dusk without perceiving a shadow of change in one's environment. I reminded myself of the impression made on me by the clean profiles of the musicians, the gloss of their linen; the dull black of their coats, the beloved shapes of the instruments, the patches of yellow light thrown by the green-shaded stand-lamps on the smooth, varnished bellies of the cellos and the bass viols in the rear, the restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows; I recalled how, in the first orchestra I had ever heard, those long bow strokes seemed to draw the soul out of me, as a conjuror's stick reels out paper ribbon from a hat.

The first number was the Tannhäuser overture. When the violins drew out the first strain of the Pilgrims' chorus, my Aunt Georgiana clutched my coat sleeve. Then it was that I first realized that for her this singing of basses and stinging frenzy of lighter strings broke a silence of thirty years, the inconceivable silence of the plains. With the battle between the two motifs, with the bitter frenzy of the Venusberg[10] theme and its ripping of strings, came to me an overwhelming sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat. I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, the rain-gullied clay about the naked house; the four dwarf ash seedlings on which the dishcloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there is the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that stretched to sunset; between, the sordid conquests of peace, more merciless than those of war.

The overture closed. My aunt released my coat sleeve, but she said nothing. She sat staring at the orchestra through a dullness of thirty years, through the films made, little by little, by each of the three hundred and sixty-five days in every one of them. What, I wondered, did she get from it? She had been a good pianist in her day, I knew, and her musical education had been broader than that of most music teachers of a quarter of a century ago. She had often told me of Mozart's operas and Meyerbeer's, and I could remember hearing her sing, years ago, certain melodies of Verdi. When I had fallen ill with a fever she used to sit by my cot in the evening, while the cool night wind blew in through the faded mosquito netting tacked over the window, and I lay watching a bright star that burned red above the cornfield, and sing "Home to our mountains, oh, let us return!" in a way fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of homesickness already.

I watched her closely through the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*, trying vainly to conjecture what that warfare of motifs, that seething turmoil of strings and winds, might mean to her. Had this music any message for her? Did or did not a new planet swim into her ken? Wagner had been a sealed book to Americans before the sixties. Had she anything left with which to comprehend this glory that had flashed around the world since she had gone from it? I was in a fever of curiosity, but Aunt Georgiana sat silent upon her peak in Darien.[11] She preserved

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10. Venusberg (vē′ nəs bʉrg′): A legendary mountain in Germany where Venus, the Roman goddess of love, held court.

11. peak in Darien (der′ ē ən): The mountain on the Isthmus of Panama. From "On First Looking at Chapman's Homer" by English poet John Keats (1795–1821).

AT THE OPERA
Mary Stevenson Cassatt
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

this utter immobility throughout the numbers from the *Flying Dutchman*, though her fingers worked mechanically upon her black dress, as though of themselves they were recalling the piano score they had once played. Poor old hands! They were stretched and pulled and twisted into mere tentacles to hold, and lift, and knead with; the palms unduly swollen, the fingers bent and knotted, on one of them a thin worn band that had once been a wedding ring. As I pressed and gently quieted one of those groping hands, I remembered, with quivering eyelids, their services for me in other days.

Soon after the tenor began the "Prize Song," I heard a quick-drawn breath, and turned to my aunt. Her eyes were closed, but the tears were glistening on her cheeks, and I think in a moment more they were in my eyes as well. It never really dies, then, the

soul? It withers to the outward eye only, like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. My aunt wept gently throughout the development and elaboration of the melody.

During the intermission before the second half of the concert, I questioned my aunt and found that the "Prize Song" was not new to her. Some years before there had drifted to the farm in Red Willow County a young German, a tramp cow puncher who had sung in the chorus at Bayreuth,[12] when he was a boy, along with the other peasant boys and girls. Of a Sunday morning he used to sit on his blue gingham-sheeted bed in the hands' bedroom, which opened off the kitchen, cleaning the leather of his boots and saddle, and singing the "Prize Song," while my aunt went about her work in the kitchen. She had hovered about him until she had prevailed upon him to join the country church, though his sole fitness for this step, so far as I could gather, lay in his boyish face and his possession of this divine melody. Shortly afterward he had gone to town on the Fourth of July, lost his money at a faro[13] table, ridden a saddled Texas steer on a bet, and disappeared with a fractured collarbone.

"Well, we have come to better things than the old *Trovatore* at any rate, Aunt Georgie?" I queried, with well-meant jocularity.

Her lip quivered and she hastily put her handkerchief up to her mouth. From behind it she murmured, "And you've been hearing this ever since you left me, Clark?" Her question was the gentlest and saddest of reproaches.

"But do you get it, Aunt Georgiana, the astonishing structure of it all?" I persisted.

"Who could?" she said, absently; "why should one?"

The second half of the program consisted of four numbers from the *Ring*. This was followed by the forest music from *Siegfried*[14] and the program closed with Siegfried's funeral march. My aunt wept quietly, but almost continuously. I was perplexed as to what measure of musical comprehension was left to her, to her who had heard nothing for so many years but the singing of gospel hymns in Methodist services at the square frame schoolhouse on Section Thirteen. I was unable to gauge how much of it had been dissolved in soapsuds, or worked into bread, or milked into the bottom of a pail.

The deluge of sound poured on and on; I never knew what she found in the shining current of it; I never knew how far it bore her, or past what happy islands, or under what skies. From the trembling of her face I could well believe that the *Siegfried* march, at least, carried her out where the myriad graves are, out into the gray, burying grounds of the sea; or into some world of death vaster yet, where, from the beginning of the world, hope has lain down with hope, and dream with dream and, renouncing, slept.

The concert was over; the people filed out of the hall chattering and laughing, glad to relax and find the living level again, but my kinswoman made no effort to rise. I spoke gently to her. She burst into tears and sobbed pleadingly, "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!"

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs, the tall, unpainted house, naked as a tower, with weather-curled boards; the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry, the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.

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12. Bayreuth (bī roit'): A city in Germany known for its annual Wagnerian music festivals.

13. faro (fer' ō): A gambling game in which players bet on the cards to be turned up from the top of the dealer's deck.

14. Siegfried (sēg' frēd): An opera based on the adventures of Siegfried, a legendary hero in medieval German literature.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What do you think of Cather's depictions of Boston and Nebraska? Do you think that she is fair to her home state? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel about Aunt Georgiana? Do you admire her or pity her? Explain.
3. What do you think of Clark?

Recalling

4. (a) Why is Clark's Aunt Georgiana coming to visit? (b) Explain his reaction to the news of her visit.
5. (a) Why does Clark take Aunt Georgiana to the Wagner matinée? (b) Why does he grow doubtful that she will enjoy it?
6. Describe three ways in which Aunt Georgiana indulged her love of music while living on the frontier.

Interpreting

7. (a) What impression is conveyed through the physical descriptions of Red Willow County? (b) Contrast the impression of life in Red Willow County with life in Boston.
8. What does Aunt Georgiana mean when she comments, "Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you"?
9. (a) Why does the opera have such a powerful effect on Aunt Georgiana? (b) In what way does the effect of the music on Aunt Georgiana in turn awaken Clark?

Applying

10. (a) How can environment shape character? (b) How can people shape their environment?

Analyzing Literature

Understanding Characterization

Characterization is the means by which an author reveals a character's personality. Because of Cather's use of a first-person narrator, much of what we learn about Aunt Georgiana comes from Clark's thoughts and feelings regarding her.

1. What is revealed about Aunt Georgiana through descriptions of her appearance?
2. What does Aunt Georgiana's reaction to the opera reveal about her personality?
3. What is revealed about Clark's personality through his thoughts and feelings regarding his aunt?
4. How does the fact that much of what we learn about Aunt Georgiana is revealed through Clark's thoughts and feelings shape our impressions of her?

Thinking and Writing

Supporting an Opinion

Review the freewriting assignment you completed earlier. Do you think music is a valuable component of daily life? Write a short essay for your teacher discussing whether or not music adds to the quality of life. In your prewriting, list evidence from daily life. Then, after organizing your evidence into an outline, write your essay using your evidence to support your argument. Use transitions to link your ideas, and vary your sentence structure. When you revise, make sure that you have included enough evidence to adequately support your argument.

Learning Options

1. **Writing.** For the most part, Clark cannot gauge the effect of the music on his aunt. He states that he "never knew what she found in the shining current of it;" he "never knew how far it bore her." Let Aunt Georgiana speak for herself. Write a diary entry in which you record her reactions to the Wagner matinée. Keep in mind that this is her first concert in thirty years.
2. **Cross-curricular Connection.** Together with several classmates, organize a Wagner matinée. Locate recordings of two or more of the operas by Wagner. Introduce and play the music for the class.
3. **Cross-curricular Connection.** At the beginning of the story, Clark describes how Aunt Georgiana and Uncle Howard took a homestead on the Nebraska frontier. Find out how the Homestead Act of 1862 opened the frontier for settlement. Does Cather present an accurate portrait of life on a homestead? Share your findings in a class discussion.